Remarks of Congresswoman Anna G. Eshoo
"Expanding & Strengthening Democracy -- The Role of Technology."

U.S. Chamber of Commerce
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Thank you, Ken, for your kind introduction and for your important leadership of NDI.

It's a pleasure to be here this morning to help kick off this important event to examine the role of technology in expanding and strengthening democracy, both here in the United States and around the world.

As Ken mentioned, I have the privilege of representing California's 14th Congressional District, which encompasses much of Silicon Valley. So it probably won't surprise you to hear that I'm a firm believer in the power of technology and in the transformative role it can play in promoting freedom and democracy.

America is not only a political and economic superpower, but it is a technology superpower, and the issues you're examining today will continue to grow in significance as the United States promotes democratic principles in our foreign affairs.

Because of the prominent role that information technology occupies in today's society, its role in virtually all aspects of the economy, politics, and entertainment is incontrovertible and largely taken for granted.

But throughout our history, technology and innovation have always been catalysts for revolutionary changes in society and government, empowering the individual to question authority and challenge the status quo.

In the 15th century Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press, which allowed mass production of the printed word. The printing press helped destroy the feudal system by bringing knowledge to the masses, and brought on the Renaissance and some of the world's greatest art and discoveries.

These same forces led to the Age of Enlightenment which swept through Western Europe and to America in the 18th Century.

In America, this new emphasis on reason and individual freedom found its most eloquent expression in the printed works of Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, which convinced the American colonists to take up arms in revolution.

It is precisely this empowerment of the individual – so cherished by our Founding Fathers – that <u>technology</u> has enabled.

What the printing press made possible in centuries past, the Internet has amplified exponentially.

If Thomas Paine were alive today, he wouldn't be a "radical pamphleteer" – he'd be a blogger at www.CommonSense.com.

The Internet has already had a tremendous impact on the American political system.

During the last presidential election, political parties, candidates, and independent groups utilized the Internet to organize and raise money in new and innovative ways.

Direct communications with grassroots voters have also been revolutionized by groups such as MoveOn.org.

(I was actually somewhat of a pioneer in using technology for voter outreach. During my first run for Congress in the late 1980s, I was one of the first candidates to distribute videotape presentations to voters as part of my campaign.)

The Internet has also completely changed the manner in which political campaigns and politics in general are covered in the mainstream media. The impact of blogs and independent websites on traditional news organizations is perhaps the most important phenomenon we observed during the 2004 election.

Bloggers on the left and right have begun to serve both as "fact checkers" for news organizations as well as actual sources of news and information.

Some impacts of the Internet – I believe – are detrimental to the political process. Much of the information spread on the Net is not well-researched or held to traditional journalistic standards, but it's not always considered in this light.

As a result, rumor and innuendo are often given much more credence and visibility than in traditional media forms. The "Swift Boating" of Senator Kerry is partly attributable to these forces.

I'm also confident that as the "Internet political community" matures and the public becomes more familiar with the Net as an alternative news medium, the American people will become more adept at evaluating the trustworthiness of a particular source of information.

I'm also hopeful that professional journalists and mainstream media outlets will learn to temper their role in amplifying information that hasn't been properly sourced or verified.

It seems as though these news organization are often desperate to keep up with the lightning pace of information dissemination on the web, and frequently get caught up in a haste to get "news" out before it's properly verified.

Again, I think with greater experience journalists will develop a better perspective of their roles versus the roles of bloggers and independent websites.

While technology has the capacity for empowering the individual and enhancing the forces of freedom, it also creates new opportunities for governments and other powerful institutions to invade individual privacy and actually suppress liberty and freedom.

We're having this very debate in our own country over the President's secret wiretapping program operated by the National Security Agency. Many Americans, including myself, are very concerned that the NSA is monitoring the communications of American citizens without court supervision or congressional authorization.

According to reports in the press, the NSA has demanded access to the "call detail records" of major telecommunications companies, which they've analyzed with advanced data-mining tools which go beyond looking for key words or flagging persons of interest, but also uncovering hidden relationships among data points.

According to FBI sources cited in these reports, most of the tips from the NSA program led to dead ends or to innocent American citizens.

This should concern all Americans.

All of us agree that our government must take every reasonable step to protect our security and prevent acts of terrorism, but the discovery of this secret program, wielding powerful new technology to target – in many cases – innocent Americans, without legal authorization by the Congress, is shocking and deeply disturbing.

Even if we assume the Bush Administration is using this information only to target terrorist and terrorist sympathizers, and immediately discards any information unrelated to terrorist investigations, the potential for abuse is obvious and real.

It certainly wouldn't take long for a political dissident in China to make this connection.

The impact of technology on China has been a fascinating development. 110 million Chinese are now on the Internet and this number is growing by 18% each year.

The Chinese government has struggled mightily to contain access to information and news, and impede electronic communications among political activists and human rights groups.

Many American technology companies have become entangled in this very sensitive situation, and some of them have been blamed for assisting the Chinese government in its efforts to suppress dissent and crackdown on dissidents.

These are extremely difficult waters to navigate, but I think that clearly errors in judgment and failures of moral leadership are evident. It's incumbent on the industry to develop more extensive codes of conduct for dealings with autocratic governments such as China, and I think this process is underway.

But on the whole, the spread of the Internet and related technologies to China will continue to have a sweeping impact on China.

Nearly any parent with a clever teenager can understand how futile the Chinese government's efforts to censor information will ultimately be, and from our own history we know the power of the ideas of individual freedom and democracy.

Because of government censorship efforts, searches of "Tiananmen Square" and "Falun Gong" on Google-China may not prove fruitful. But searches of "Thomas Paine," "Thomas Jefferson," and "Ben Franklin" will continue to unearth "radical" ideas about the power of the individual and the unalienable rights of all human beings.

And the mere existence of Chinese censorship of the Internet will ultimately prove self-defeating.

To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Every burned book enlightens the world." I think he would say the same thing about blocking websites today.

In closing I'd like to discuss another very powerful dynamic that technology will have in promoting democracy in our own society and institutions, and ultimately the world.

Just over a year ago, some of the world's greatest institutions of higher learning, including the University of Michigan, Stanford, Harvard, the New York Public Library, and Oxford, announced that they were partnering with Google to digitize their collections and put them on the Internet.

Imagine -- nearly the entirety of humankind's repository of knowledge, accessible to anyone with access to an Internet connection.

I'm particularly proud of this endeavor because two of the major participants -- Stanford University and Google -- are located in my Congressional District.

No longer will an individual be limited by geography, wealth, or disability to have access to the world's greatest literature, science, and philosophy.

A child living in Anacostia can go to her public library and access Sir Isaac Newton's original manuscripts from Oxford.

A boy in Guangzhou can peruse commentaries on the Federalist Papers by constitutional scholars at Harvard.

Computer scientists in Africa can read the latest doctoral dissertations by Ph.D. candidates at Stanford.

And all of the greatest works of literature in the public domain whose copyrights have expired, will be freely available to anyone.

The digitization of these works will also ensure that they are preserved forever, for future generations.

This project follows in the spirit of President Jefferson who resurrected the Library of Congress after it was destroyed by British troops in the War of 1812. He did this by selling the government (at a tremendous discount) his vast, personal collection of books.

Jefferson understood the importance of books, the need to preserve knowledge and make it available to the masses.

Jefferson said, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

Jefferson identified the essence of the democratizing effect of technology -- "that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

He recognized that access to information was in fact more important than government in securing freedom and democracy.

And through technology in the 21st Century, we are making more information available to more human beings throughout the world than previous generations would have ever thought possible.

I look forward to working with you and my colleagues in Congress to making the promise of technology a reality.

Thank you again for having me here today, and enjoy the rest of your conference.